



Kiswahili in 11 countries

Kiswahili

Why is Kiswahili special?

Kiswahili is unique. It deserves all of the attention that it gets. This item in our series is to say why that is, and to say why South Africans should take an interest in the Kiswahili language and its history. Kiswahili can show South African languages the way forward. Kiswahili is a success.

Kiswahili is spoken in 11 countries and has official status in 5 of them: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Union of the Comoros (where it is known as Comorian). The other countries with first-language Swahili-speaking populations are: Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. In most of these countries there are much larger populations of second-language Kiswahili-speakers, who make use of the special, useful and convenient characteristics of this great language.

As we will see in the next item, only four other languages have comparable international reach in Africa, and they are all languages that originated outside the continent. They are Arabic, Portuguese, French and English.

Of the hundreds of indigenous African languages, only Kiswahili has been able to grow in the modern period to compete with the former colonial languages. This is why we can say it is unique and that it shows the way forward for other African languages.

Kiswahili is a modern language

The rise of Kiswahili has taken place in modern times. Kiswahili is contemporary in this respect to two other languages that have established themselves in the modern world: Modern Hebrew and Afrikaans. All these three languages have ancient origins, but became what they are today in a deliberate phase of modern development starting in the 19th Century, and consolidating in the 20th Century.

Kiswahili has many dictionaries

As far as we can ascertain, Kiswahili first broke through the missionary barrier in 1981 with the publication of the “Kamusi ya Kiswahili sanifu” (Standard Kiswahili Dictionary) in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. This dictionary has been revised and re-published at least 43 times to date. It can also be downloaded from the Internet.

The publication of “Kamusi ya Kiswahili sanifu”, known as KKS, was met with great pride and joy by Kiswahili speakers everywhere. It has been followed by many more monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries, some of them derived from the KKS and others being substantially new projects. One publisher alone offers five different monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries (see [here](#)).

Kiswahili has literature

Kiswahili-language publications are abundant in all aspects of literature from school and university books, to newspapers and magazines, to poetry and novels and comics. Swahili language appears in drama and in song.

Kiswahili is still growing

Because Kiswahili is a living language, with speakers, writers, readers and dictionaries, it is able to expand its vocabulary and its usages to accommodate modern life as it develops.

Kiswahili by comparison

There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of indigenous languages spoken in Africa. Many of them are well known. We can mention Ovambo, Luba and Lingala, Yoruba, Wolof and Ashanti, Baganda, Luo, Masai and Kikuyu, and many Central and Southern African Languages including the nine indigenous official languages of South Africa.

In none of these cases does it appear, as it does with Kiswahili, that the major problems have been solved. On the contrary, in all cases it appears that the commanding heights of the literary and most conspicuously, political world are

generally occupied by the four principal former colonial languages: Arabic, Portuguese, French and English.

Projecting forward, it is hard to see how the indigenous African languages will avoid a decline, or find a turning-point in that decline. It is only with Kiswahili that we can see anything like an international challenge to the former colonial tongues. That challenge rests upon the vigour of scholarship and its products, the monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries, and upon the literary culture that is in turn buttressed by the existence of monolingual dictionaries.

Kiswahili Proverb:

Haba na haba hujaza kibaba

Meaning: Little by little fills up the measure

[Click and find more provderbs here](#)

Languages, Part 5a



Arabic, Portuguese, French, English

The map above, found via Google Images, was labelled “Business Languages in Africa”. There are no indigenous African languages mentioned. All are exotic languages, except that Ethiopia’s language is referred to as “Other”.

Tactics

What one can note is two things, one tactical, pointing to practical necessity in politics, as much as in business.

This is the practical necessity for South Africa, if it is to have an effective political relationship with the rest of the continent, to have good translation into English from French, Arabic and Portuguese.

This means a cadre force of translators who are not politically neutral, but who are editors in their own right, and capable of discriminating and selecting from the available material.

Similarly, these translators need to be at work translating South African material into those other languages, and publishing it by all available means.

So that the net result is a continuous two-way flow of ideas and dialogue between SA and the rest of the continent.

Strategy

The second matter is to note the dominance of the languages of previous colonists, and to put in place measures that will inexorably work to turn this situation around.

What are these measures?

As South Africans, we have to begin at home. We have to have dictionaries in all of our languages. That is, monolingual dictionaries. The movement towards an inter-lingual communication begins with the consolidation of the individual languages. Otherwise, the colonisers' languages will continue to dominate and to mediate between weak indigenous languages.

With that groundwork of dictionaries in place, then a superstructure of translation has to be created. Even if it is technically sophisticated, it will still be labour-intensive. That is to say, output will be in direct proportion to human effort applied. This is the paradox of IT. The more it becomes frictionless by computerisation, the more direct is the relationship between human input and output.

That means that there need to be plenty of linguists. Modern language departments at universities need to grow enormously. The number of academics needs to increase or even multiply, as well as the numbers of students.

Africans need to own the language business of Africa. The map has to look different. The whole concept has to change.



AUM sign in Tamil script

Other languages in South Africa

In the Wikipedia (see extract below), we saw that there are many other significant languages used in South Africa.

We saw that the South African Constitution says that the Pan South African Language Board must:

...promote and ensure respect for -

(i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including [German](#), [Greek](#), [Gujarati](#), [Hindi](#), [Portuguese](#), [Tamil](#), [Telegu](#) and [Urdu](#); and
(ii) [Arabic](#), [Hebrew](#), [Sanskrit](#) and other [languages used for religious purposes](#) in South Africa.

This part of our course is a reminder of the importance of these languages

Other significant languages spoken in South Africa (Wikipedia):

Other languages spoken in South Africa, though not mentioned in the Constitution, include [Fanagalo](#), [Lobedu \(Khilobedu\)](#), [Northern Ndebele \(Sindebele\)](#), [Phuthi \(Siphuthi\)](#). **Lobedu** has been variously claimed to be a dialect of Northern Sotho and an autonomous language. **Fanagalo** is a [pidgin](#) often used as a mining [lingua franca](#).

Significant numbers of immigrants from [Europe](#), elsewhere in [Africa](#), and the [Indian subcontinent](#) means that a wide variety of other languages can also be found in parts of South Africa. In the older immigrant communities there are: [Greek](#), [Gujarati](#), [Hindi](#), [Portuguese](#), [Tamil](#), [Urdu](#), [Yiddish](#), and smaller numbers of Dutch, [French](#) and [German](#) speakers.

These non-official languages may be used in limited semi-official use where it has been determined that these languages are prevalent. More importantly, these languages have significant local functions in specific communities whose identity is tightly bound around the linguistic and cultural identity that these non-official SA languages signal.

The fastest growing non-official language is Portuguese - first spoken by white, black, and [mulato](#) settlers and refugees from [Angola](#) and [Mozambique](#) after they won independence from [Portugal](#) and now by more recent immigrants from those countries again - and increasingly French, spoken by immigrants and refugees from [Francophone Central Africa](#).

More recently, speakers of [North](#), Central and [West African](#) languages have arrived in South Africa, mostly in the major cities, especially in [Johannesburg](#) and [Pretoria](#), but also [Cape Town](#) and [Durban](#).

international phonetics (2005)

consonants
(pulmonic)

	LABIAL		CORONAL				DORSAL				RADICAL		LARYNGEAL
	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Retroflex	Alveolo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Epi-glottal	Glottal
Nasal	m	ɱ	n		ɳ		ɲ		ŋ	ɴ			
Plosive	p b		t d		ʈ ɖ		c ɟ		k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ	ʔ̚
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ		ħ ʕ	ħ̥ ʕ̥	h ɦ
Approximant		ʋ	ɹ		ɻ		j		ɰ				
Tap, flap		ɹ̥	ɾ		ɽ								
Trill	ʙ		r										
Lateral fricative			ɬ ɮ		ɭ		ɬ̺		ɮ̺				
Lateral approximant			l		ɭ		ʎ		ʟ				
Lateral flap			ɭ		ɭ̥								

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a modally voiced consonant, except for murmured ɦ.

Shaded areas denote articulations judged to be impossible. Light grey letters are unofficial extensions of the IPA.

consonants (non-pulmonic)

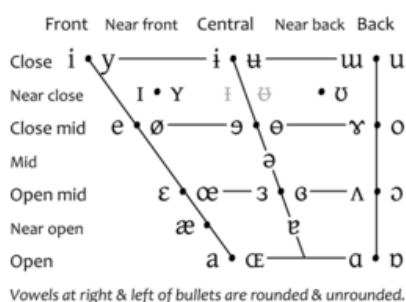
clicks	implosives	ejectives
ɠ Bilabial fricated ɲ̥ Laminar alveolar fricated ("dental") ɲ̥ Apical (post)alveolar abrupt ("retroflex") ɲ̥ Subapical retroflex ɲ̥ Laminar postalveolar abrupt ("palatal") ɲ̥ Lateral alveolar fricated ("lateral")	ɓ Bilabial ɗ Dental or alveolar ɗ̥ Retroflex ɟ Palatal ɠ Velar ɠ Uvular	ʔ examples: ɸ Bilabial ɸ̥ Dental or alveolar ɸ̥ Velar ɸ̥ Lateral affricate ɸ̥ Alveolar fricative

consonants (co-articulated)

ɱ	Voiceless labialized velar approximant	//morphophonemic//
ɰ	Voiced labialized velar approximant	/phonemic/
ɰ̥	Voiced labialized palatal approximant	[phonetic]
ɰ̥	Simultaneous x and ʃ (existence disputed)	<orthographic>
ɰ̥	Affricates and double articulations	
ɡ̥	may be joined by a tie bar	

brackets

vowels



Vowels at right & left of bullets are rounded & unrounded.

suprasegmentals

ˈ	Primary stress	ˈ	Extra stress
ˌ	Secondary stress	[ˌfounəˈtɪʃən]	
eː	Long	eː	Half-long
e	Short	ẽ	Extra-short
.	Syllable break	t̚	Linking (no break)
intonation			
ˊ	Minor (foot) break		
ˋ	Major (intonation) break		
↗	Global rise	↘	Global fall

(tone)

level tones	contour tones (e.g.)
ē ˥ Top	ě ˨ Rising
é ˨ High	ê ˨ Falling
ē ˨ Mid	ẽ ˨ High rising
è ˨ Low	ẽ̇ ˨ Low rising
ẽ̇ ˨ Bottom	ẽ̇ ˨ High falling
tone terracing	
˥ Upstep	ẽ̇ ˨ Peaking
˥ Downstep	ẽ̇ ˨ Dipping

diacritics

Diacritics may be moved to fit a letter, as ɸ̥ or ɟ̥. Other letters may be used as diacritics of phonetic detail: ɾ̥ (fricative release), ɸ̥ (breathy voice), m̥ (glottalized), ɾ̥ (epenthetic schwa), o̥ (off-glide), u̥ (compressed).

SYLLABICITY & RELEASES	PHONATION	PRIMARY ARTICULATION	SECONDARY ARTICULATION
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Syllabic	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Voiceless or Slack voice
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Non-syllabic	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Modal voice or Stiff voice
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	(Pre)aspirated	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Breathy voice
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Nasal release	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Creaky voice
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Lateral release	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Strident
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	No audible release	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Linguolabial
ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Lowered (ɲ̥ is a bilabial approximant)	ɲ̥ ɲ̥	Raised (ɲ̥ is a voiced alveolar non-sibilant fricative, ɲ̥ a fricative trill)

International Phonetic Notation

Phonetic Notation

James Tweedie has kindly written a contribution to this course on the topic of Phonetic Notation (attached).

Above is the full chart of phonetic notation of the International Phonetic Association, [taken from Wikipedia](#).

Although it is referred to in Wikipedia as an “alphabet”, this seems to “beg the question”, because if alphabets were truly phonetic, then a general, standardised system of phonetic notation would hardly be necessary. But in fact none of the alphabets are, or could possibly be, truly phonetic.

That is why we are calling this item “Phonetic Notation”, and not “alphabet”.

In the next item, we will introduce the idea of having a single, cross-language chart of phonetic notation for the eleven South African official languages.

The point being that practical steps can be taken that will make it more possible and easier to cross over between the official languages, but that this will have to be done from a general South African point of view. The appropriate vehicle for developing, maintaining and publishing such a chart should probably be PanSALB.

- **The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Phonetic Symbols, James Tweedie, August 2013](#).**
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SA Phonetic Notation Key (CU, 2013)

The motto of the coat of arms - *!ke e:/xarra//ke* - is in the Khoisan language of the /Xam people, and means "diverse people unite", or "people who are different joining together".

This item is to introduce a concept, a possible tool, that could assist South Africans to learn how to pronounce each others' languages.

The attached document is in the form of a table. In the left-hand column, phonetic symbols passed on the "IPA" that we saw yesterday, are listed. The list is not complete, but it is sufficient to cover the range of the South African official languages.

In the next 11 columns, words are to be put - words belonging to all the SA official languages – so that reading across one can find an example in his or her own language, of that pronunciation.

When it is complete, it will serve as a key to the pronunciation of all of these languages. Given a the phonetic notation of any word, one can read across to find the vowel and consonant equivalents.

If used over time, the table would eventually teach the user how to read the phonetic notation without using the table.

Alternatively, the process could be computerised into an “app” (application). On a device such as a laptop, the pronunciation of any South African word could be read off or played in the form of sound.

The table is not complete, because it turns out to be a large task to compile it in the first place. It is the kind of work that needs to be “crowd sourced”. The work-in-progress should at least be sufficient to convey the idea that means can be found, and put in the hands of the citizens, whereby they can lower the barriers between languages in South Africa to a material degree.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Phonetic notation and equivalent phonemes in SA words](#) (draft form of table, CU, 2013).
 - A PDF file of the reading text is attached
 - To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).
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Course: Languages

26003, Introductions to Parts 5 and 6

1960 words